

# Rural Tourism Marketing

## Chapter Eleven – The Internet

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Without sounding too dramatic, the Internet has changed everything.

It has changed the way tourism will be marketed in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century as surely as the color brochure and the visitors guide before it. It has made the most dramatic difference in tourism development since Christopher Columbus returned to Spain and said, “You won’t believe what I found!” (Okay, maybe that’s a bit of an exaggeration, but not by much.)

Just five years ago, a survey commissioned by a major east coast university of 49 U. S. state tourism offices and 12 Canadian provincial and territorial tourism offices reported that 60 percent of them had Internet web sites. What do you think the percentage is today?



The same survey indicated that less than half of the tourism offices planned to update their web sites at least once a week. What do you think the frequency of updates is now? When asked if they agreed that the web would grow to 200 million users by the year 2000, only 42 percent of tourism marketers believed the answer was yes. (According to the recent research, there were approximately 327 million Internet users worldwide at the end of 2000.)

The Internet and its effect on the tourism industry has grown faster than anyone in tourism, or most other industries believed possible.

Consider these statistics:

- There are estimated to be 100 million Internet users in the U.S.
- An estimated 6.9 trillion e-mail messages were sent in the year 2000.
- 82% of Internet users consider web access to be “indispensable.”

## Travel and The Web

The Internet is proving to be of greater value to some “traditional” industries than others. Web sites dedicated to selling groceries, cars or toys are floundering due to consumer reluctance to purchase these items anywhere but at traditional retailers, while tourism and travel is flourishing on the web.

The Internet has proven to be an extremely popular way to research travel destinations. Why wait three weeks or more for a visitors guide or brochure to arrive when you can instantly research virtually any destination on the planet with the click of a mouse?

The Travel Industry Association of America (TIA) reports the correlation between the online population and travel is so strong that almost all Internet users are also travelers, with 93 percent of Internet users responding that they took at least one trip of 100 miles or more [away from home] in 1999. The same report says that the number of online travelers has grown 190 percent from 1996 to 1999.

According to the latest listings on Yahoo, 45 Convention & Visitors Bureaus in California have web sites, as do 272 Chambers of Commerce. This chapter will generally make the assumption that your organization is one of them.

### Back to the basics

Here is a quick review of some of the basic marketing points for tourism promotion organizations with a presence (as everyone should) on the web. If you have yet to create a web site with destination marketing as its purpose or plan to update your current one, you will find these points essential.

1. Choose a URL (web site address) that is short, easy to remember, and says who you are. Examples include [www.mytown.com](http://www.mytown.com), [www.visit-mytown.org](http://www.visit-mytown.org), or [www.visitcalifornia.com](http://www.visitcalifornia.com).
2. Don't put too many graphic files on the home page. More on this later, but remember to create a page that loads quickly.
3. Don't forget to reach specialized target markets. In addition to your regular home page links for accommodations, restaurants, events and so forth, remember to place immediate links for niche market segments as well.
4. Add value and interactivity to your web site with links, contests, games, etc. A contest is also a great way to gather e-mail addresses for a mailing list (with permission, of course!)
5. Hyperlink to map sites and weather sites on the web to provide more information than you can generate yourself.
6. Update your web site often. There is no bigger “web turn-off” than dated information.
7. Incorporate an interactive request form, guest book or survey. Make sure your web site is truly a “two-way street.”

8. Save money, especially postage for guide mailings, by having as much information on the site as possible.
9. List your web site with all the major search engines.

As we all know, creating a website is simply the first step in a constant process of promotion and refinement. If we build it, will they come? Not likely. But if we build it, promote it, refine it, promote it some more, and refine it again we are likely to achieve the level of success on the Internet for which we are striving.

**Helpful Hint:** *Don't post web pages that are "under construction." You wouldn't stay in a hotel that wasn't finished or read a book that had pages missing. A web page is either ready, or it isn't!*



### Elements of good design

Whether you are building your first web site or redesigning your existing site, consider these suggestions:

1. Make your web site image consistent with your offline image. Use design elements from your visitors guide, brochures and paid advertising.
2. Use a consistent design and layout throughout the site.
3. Steer clear of gimmicks such as scrolling text, music, etc. They tend to annoy more than entertain. (Remember that some of your potential visitors might be looking for their next vacation destination at work, where a sudden outburst of "California Here I Come" on their computer might not be appreciated!)
4. Use a site map or index page, and make sure your site is easy to navigate.
5. Make sure you have contact information such as addresses, phone numbers and e-mail links easily accessible from anywhere in the site.
6. Keep graphics small. Use "thumbnails" on photo album pages to keep loading time to a minimum.
7. Consider the use of a "splash page" for destination marketing. (A splash page is a colorful opening page that leads into the site. More and more destinations are using them simply because they make a spectacular first impression.)



California Tourism uses a visually stunning "Splash Page," which automatically changes to the home page a few seconds later.

### **Internet Marketing**

Having a web site and Internet marketing are not the same thing, any more than owning a car and taking a trip from California to New York are the same thing. Having a web site and owning a car are simply the first step, the tools if you will, in reaching your destination. Without adequate research, planning and execution your web site will be the promotional equivalent of a car sitting in your driveway.

Internet experts are in agreement that you must:

- Determine your online objectives
- Define your target market
- Develop an Internet Marketing Strategy that is appropriate for your organization
- Develop your web site with your target market in mind

For those of us in the business of promoting an overall destination rather than a specific business, a major objective might be "to promote Smallville as a vacation destination," as opposed to booking reservations or selling a product online. Another goal

might be to “provide on-line resources to the travel media” or “to promote attendance at the Smallville Fig Festival.”

Methods of achieving those objectives might include a colorful photo album online, a presentation of “things to see and do,” a frequently asked questions (FAQ) page, and a press center containing press releases and a direct link to your media person.

A university study of destination web sites listed such target markets as “upper income/up-scale/affluent travelers,” travelers within specific age ranges, business travelers, meeting planners and world-wide consumers. Unfortunately, ten percent of those responding indicated that a target market was “computer users.” (Somewhat like saying a target market for your visitors guide is “people who like to get things in the mail!”)

Whatever your objectives and target markets (don’t forget non-English speaking travelers) the most important thing is to view every destination website that you can find, read everything you can get your hands on about destination marketing on the Internet and constantly fine-tune your web site.

**Helpful Hint:** *The target market for your website should be substantially the same target markets you have selected for your other promotional efforts. Find out who makes the travel decisions (men, women, specific age groups) and on what basis (location, relative proximity, climate) and incorporate those elements in your web site.*



### What you should know, when talking to the pros

There are a few key elements to website promotion that are generally beyond what most destination marketers care, or have time, to learn. But they are important elements in promoting your site on the web, and your web site designer or manager should be aware that *you* know what they are. They include:

1. **Knowing the difference between search engines and directories.** Search engines (like Alta Vista, Lycos and WebCrawler) find information on your site through elements mentioned above. Directories (like Yahoo) list your site only when you contact them.
2. **Designing your site for maximum search engine performance.** This includes the use of Meta-HTML tags (information that search engines look for), keywords (again used by search engines in finding your site), proper page titles, etc.
3. **Avoiding certain design elements search engines don’t like.** These include meta refresh tags (embedded elements that automatically move the viewer from one page to another after a certain period of time), frames (dividing the display area into two or more independent areas), home page image maps (picture a map of the US where you can click on each state). Most search engines have problems with those design elements.



4. **Don't try to trick the search engines.** Don't repeat keywords or otherwise "spam" the search engines as they might drop your site all together.
5. **Updating Your Site Frequently.** Not only to keep content current, but also because certain search engines (called Spiders) can determine how often your site is updated.



Who wouldn't want to visit Oxnard after viewing this attractive home page?

### **What every destination website should Offer**

The above headline is, of course, ridiculous on its face. Certainly, there are no two destination promotion web sites alike, and what applies to one may well be completely inappropriate for another. However, there seems to be a pattern emerging among destination marketing organizations with certain elements showing up time and time again. Here are some of those key information categories, and you can use your own discretion as to their importance on your site:

Accommodations Listing (broken down by category in many cases)

Activities (again, can be broken down many different ways)

Calendar of Events

Contact Method (e-mail for all staff)

Contests

Dining Guide

FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions)

Film Commission

Map (Don't forget the possibility of linking to a map site on the web)

Media Center (with link to appropriate staff)

- include a press kit and photographs

Meeting Planning/Convention Planning Information (and link to staff person)

Photo Gallery (explore cool tricks like 360 degree viewing!)

Shopping Guide

Special Offers

Travel Trade Information

Visitors Guide Request form

Weather

Remember that these are popular, but not necessarily right for your purposes.

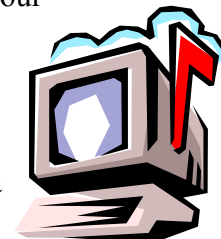
### **The information highway is a two-way street**

Since we began this chapter with the premise that many of its readers already have web sites in one form or another, let's move beyond the basics into more advanced areas of using the Internet for destination marketing.

The ability to communicate in both directions, from you to the client and from the client to you, is one of the major advantages of a web-based marketing program. Potential customers can send you a simple e-mail requesting a visitors guide or more information, and you can respond, if for no other reason than to tell them that it's on the way. But you can also gather information from your website about who is interested in your destination, respond in much greater detail, build mailing lists (only with permission!) and much more.

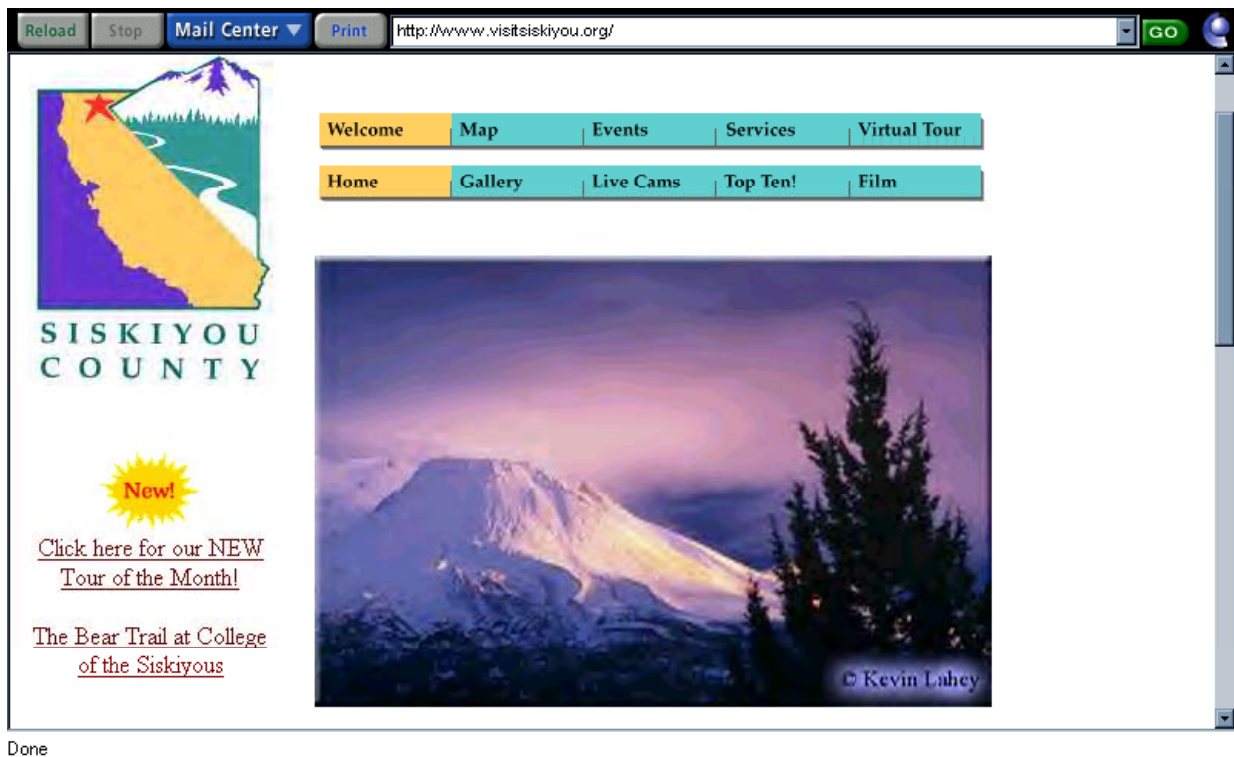
So, here are some more suggestions:

- Run an "opt-in" marketing campaign. This means people can easily subscribe and unsubscribe to your e-mailed newsletter. Always ask if people would like to join your mailing list, and with every e-mail you send give them an option to get off it. You'll be surprised how many people are interested in regular updates about your destination.
- Hold a monthly contest. What better way to ask for customer's names, addresses, phone numbers and e-mail addresses than by offering them the chance to win a stay at your destination. Your hotels will likely be more than willing participants in exchange for a little more visibility on your website. Again, always ask for permission if you turn entries into a mailing list.





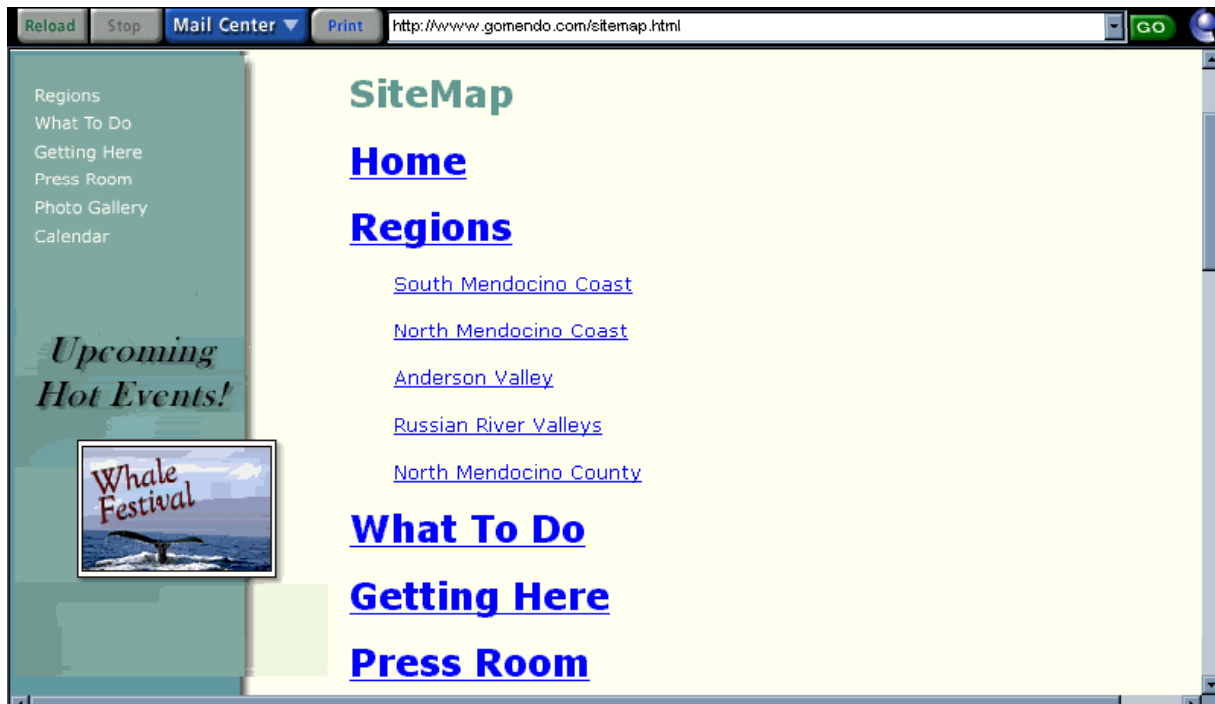
- Use automated mail responders. Ask your Internet Service Provider about these systems which send back responses automatically. Those responses can include requested information for hotels, activities or an event calendar. Your staff can relax while technology does the work!
- Develop a strategy for linking with other web sites. A Georgia Tech study indicated that 88 percent of people find web sites via links from other sites. Eighty-five percent found them through search engines.
- Submit your site for various awards. Winning awards drives business to your web pages.
- Refer to your website in *everything* you do including your letterhead, business cards, paid advertising, press releases, your visitors guide, your recorded telephone messages...everything!
- Study monthly web reports for your site to determine where web visitors are coming from, what pages they are viewing, how long they are staying on your site, and where they are going from there. Use this information to fine-tune your Internet marketing.



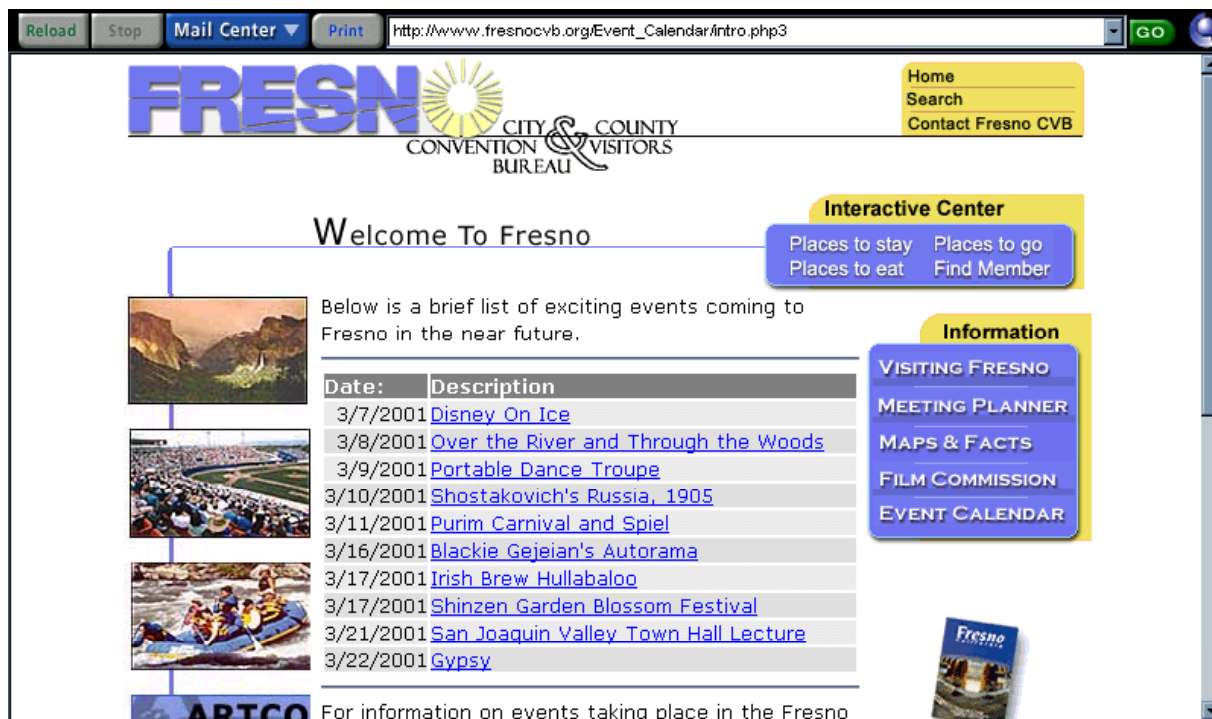
The Siskiyou County home page has clean graphics, is fast loading, and features beautiful photography.

There is obviously much more to Internet marketing for visitor destinations than can be mentioned on these few pages. An excellent resource is the book we mentioned earlier Internet Marketing for Your Tourism Business, by Susan Sweeney. Many of the suggestions above come from that book. It is available through Maximum Press and found on the web (of course!) at [www.maximumpress.com](http://www.maximumpress.com).





A clean, graphics free site map like this one from the Mendocino County Alliance web site makes it easy for visitors to find exactly what they are looking for. (Partial page view) [www.gomendo.org](http://www.gomendo.org)



The Fresno CVB web site features a unique design for their event calendar page, with vertical listings and instant links to each event. (Partial page view) [www.fresnocvb.org](http://www.fresnocvb.org)

## Internet website – Target Markets

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### Target Markets by Priority:

#1

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#2

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#3

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### Objectives and Methods for Target Market #1

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### Objectives and Methods for Target Market #2

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### Objectives and Methods for Target Market #3

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